

newsfeature

NF/7

November 27, 1974

HEADING OFF EUROPE'S NADERS

Washington, D.C. -- Europe is discovering the consumer. The Old Continent has no Ralph Nader: but it's trying to make Europe's potential Naders unnecessary by legislating consumer issues at the national and European Common Market level.

Last year, a consultative committee on consumer affairs was set up in Brussels, Common Market Headquarters. The Committee includes spokesmen for the labor movement and cooperatives.

Most consumer reform in Europe, so far, has been on national lines, with the richer countries generally out front. In Britain, there's a special ministry, headed by a cabinet officer. Holland and Ireland plan similar government departments.

Other countries have strengthened consumer protection laws: Germany, for instance, now has a strong law on credit sales and others on food quality control and hygiene. Germany now forbids advertising that makes health claims for food. Cigarette advertising is banned on radio and TV.

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The very existence of a nine-nation Common Market, with rising consumption and living standards, has posed wider problems than those that existed in the past. The European Community's Environment and Consumer Protection Service program aims at harmonizing national health and safety standards, eliminating deceptive advertising and labeling, limiting food additives and stabilizing common automobile safety norms.

Thanks to the Common Market, European shoppers today find their supermarkets stocked with foods, wines and other goods from all nine European Community countries. These pass duty-free across the international frontiers within the common market. At present, a citizen of one country may have consumer protection regarding the products of his own country, but not necessarily the same protection regarding other European products.

Each of the nine Community countries produces television programs for consumer information and protection. Denmark began them in 1954, France in 1961, Belgium in 1966. Others followed. In Italy, these programs aroused considerable controversy last year, and one was suppressed by government order.

The European Community has passed a great deal of specific legislation on food colorants and preservatives, livestock feeding, textiles, detergents, automobiles, and so on. Now the European Commission sees a need for more general, Europe-wide legislation.

The Commission has proposed a program giving the consumer four basic rights -- the right to protection -- whether in health or in the pocketbook: the right to redress: the right to satisfaction: and the right to information.